

Are There Too Many Doctors?

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IT seems to be the conventional thing to assume that there are too many doctors. The medical as well as the lay press harbors this notion. Sociologic reports claim to corroborate it. It has become a veritable hue and cry.

There are two conditions in medicine which are contradictory and unreconcilable. They are the following:—(1) The power of medical science to cope with the problems of disease has attained to a high state of development. (2) Comparatively seldom does a patient have bestowed upon him the time and attention which would give to him the full benefit of the medical knowledge which it would be possible to apply to his case.

In this discrepancy lies the negative answer to the question. Why does not the physician take the time and pains to give the patient the advantages which it would be possible for his patient to enjoy? First, because he must be off to another patient; and, second, because the patient can not pay him for his pains. Why must he be off to another patient? Because his livelihood requires it. Why can not the patient pay him for the pains and time necessary to secure the best that medical science can give him? Because the patient cannot afford it.

In this deplorable situation, in which the physician with his potentiality for scientific work is reduced to the exigencies of the struggle for existence, it is easy enough for the student who grasps the social problems to read the answer. There are not too many doctors. There is too little ability on the part of the people to pay their doctors.

The patient does not receive the best that medical science has to offer for the reason that he cannot afford to pay for it. Why does not the physician give it to him even though compensation is not to be expected? To the credit of the great army of medical practitioners it truly can be said that they would were it not for the fact that they cannot afford to do so. This is one of the great disappointments which the well equipped young man is destined to experience when he leaves the hospital and goes into the practice of medicine as a means of livelihood. This disillusionment he never recovers from. He always feels the sting of the economic necessity which deprives him more and more of using the microscope and the other scientific methods which once, in his student days, filled him with an exalted zeal for his work.

Were the average doctor to tarry with the first case that he sees in the course of the day, and bestow upon it the attention which it

* In the March, 1912, issue of *Pearson's Magazine* there appears an article on the subject, "Are There Too Many Doctors?" The premises set forth in this juvenile attack upon the profession are so false and the conclusions drawn are so absurd that they need not be quoted here. However, the Editor believes the subject is a timely one and he has asked Dr. Warbasse to open a discussion upon this question.—ED.

should receive, if the best that medical science could offer were to be given, his grocer would go unpaid, his children unshod, and the mortgage on his house would soon be foreclosed.

It is decidedly true that the physician is influenced in his practice by the economic necessities. He is ground betwixt his ideals of professional philanthropy and the struggle for existence. But it is a false explanation to say that this is due to the fact that there are too many doctors. An equally sophistic explanation would be to contend that there are too many coal miners, as a reason for the struggle for life among this class of artisans. It is true that, if the men who are willing to go down into the earth and dig coal should become fewer, those who do this work might receive better pay. But that is not an explanation for the economic stress among coal miners. All the men today engaged in that work are needed at it. There are not too many. The reason that they are beset by industrial pressure and live in wretchedness is because they are not adequately compensated for the services which they render; or, what amounts to the same thing, the cost of living is disproportionately high for the wages they receive; and the reason they are not adequately compensated is because four-fifths of the wealth they produce is consumed in profits and dividends for the non-producer, who is in no sense necessary in the mining of coal and whose relation to the industry is wholly parasitical. It is this burden upon the backs of the workers which creates the economic unbalance.

If there were fewer men in either of these occupations—doctors and miners—it would not mean that the one would have more time to give to his patients or that the other could meet the demands of commerce any better than they now are met. There would only be a financial advantage to that class, such as accrues as monopoly is approached or supply is diminished, but society would be none the better for it. The problem lies back of this.

Let it be understood that the physician belongs to the exploited class, inasmuch as he feels the effects of exploitation upon the great mass of the public, whose servant he is and to whose physical efficiency it is his business to administer.

In the United States there is one doctor to every 700 of the population. In a well administered government this would be, perhaps, a sufficient number; but in this country at present the people are by no means receiving adequate medical attention. They are swindled out of millions of dollars annually by quackery, which the government fosters because quackery is business, and the laws are so constructed as to protect business and property on every side. These are the exalted things. The human animal must bend his neck to them.

The people are inadequately protected. Paternalism among an enlightened people is unnecessary, but in a population which is steeped in ignorance because it has been denied education, paternalism is a governmental duty.

Not only are quacks and all sorts of incompetents treating cases which should be under the care of physicians, but nurses and midwives are rendering services which, were the people educated sufficiently and were they financially solvent, would be receiving medical care. The patronage bestowed upon patent medicines, quackery and incompetent midwives is partly because of ignorance and partly because of economic expediency. The number of physicians has nothing to do with it.

If we had a National Department of Health, if the government were doing what it might to prevent the 10,000,000 cases of unnecessary and preventable sickness which occur annually, we should need fewer doctors; but what is the actual situation?

There are constantly and seriously sick in the United States 2,000,000 people. That means that on an average each doctor constantly has fifteen sick people under his care. But let us look at the grave character of some of these cases. There are among them 1,700,000 deaths annually. Of these deaths, 160,000 are from tuberculosis; 70,000 are from cancer; 120,000 are from diseases of the heart; 125,000 are from pneumonia; 110,000 are from enteric infections; 90,000 are from nephritis. More than 25 per cent. of our children die before they reach five years of age. This gives some idea as to what is going on.

This mortality represents but a small part of the morbidity. Typhoid fever alone is represented by 40,000 deaths annually but there are 400,000 cases of typhoid a year. While accidents and violence cause 90,000 deaths annually, there are 1,000,000 cases of injury which require surgical attention. Our 130,000 doctors would not be enough if every one of these patients could have the medical attention which his case deserves.

But this is far short of the field of the physician. His most important function should be to keep people well. As yet this function is largely neglected. Some day it will be his chief field of activity.

Were the doctors servants of the State, as is the case in the Public Health and Marine Hospital Service, they would not be engaged in commercial competition for a livelihood. They would be more independent and more efficient; scientific competition instead of commercial competition would be stimulated; and the pro rata of physicians now in practice would be none too great.

At present there is abundant wealth produced in this country to guarantee education and competence for every one to have the best that medical science has to offer, even to the prevention of disease, and the adequate education of the physician. The fact that this enormous wealth gravitates to the few, and leaves the producers of it in penury, has given rise to the far cry that there are too many doctors.

There are fundamental economic problems involved here. Tied up with them are the reasons for poor medical education, diploma mills, incompetent doctors, the commercialization of medicine, the so-called abuses of charity, the split fee, lodge practice, contract doctors, corporation doctors, and the host of products of modern social evolution—all of which are much and superficially discussed. Competitive commercialism, or the making of profits, is the casual factor which society fosters.

When that four-fifths of the wealth which industry creates, and which now finds its way to the pocket of the parasite, shall remain with the worker who produced it; when the social necessities shall belong to the people, and shall be placed beyond the reach of exploitation; when the democratization of society shall be attained—then this present era, in which too many doctors are said to exist, will be looked back upon as that benighted period in which man in his blindness withheld his hand from plucking the fruits of science which bloomed even then in resplendent abundance.

